



Rural Education in Alberta

A statement of some phases of the problem,
the proposed solution, and the results
expected from its adoption

Submitted by

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To those interested in Rural Education

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During the years since the formation of this province, and under successive governments, the state of education has steadily improved. The average period of operation of the schools has been lengthened. There is greater regularity of attendance. The pupils remain longer in school. Teachers are better equipped; the permit teacher has disappeared and the third-class certificate is a thing of the past. The requirement for normal entrance has been raised, the term has been lengthened, and all teachers, as part of their training, are required to spend at least one week in a rural school, observing and teaching under the supervision of a capable rural teacher. The courses of study have been revised and brought more into line with present-day requirements. Over ten per cent of Alberta pupils are now in high school grades, as compared with less than four per cent in 1912, and the average educational attainment on leaving school has steadily advanced. The general interest in education was never keener than today, and, comparing the present with the past, there is abundant reason for gratification.

Examining more critically, recalling the severe handicaps from which rural education suffers, comparing what is with what might be, any feeling of complacency is dispelled by one of concern—a feeling which deepens with the realization that the rural schools of Alberta have almost reached the limit of excellence which they can reasonably be expected to attain under the existing system of school administration.

In these pages there is presented an attempt to analyze the rural school problem briefly, to outline a possible solution and set forth the advantages to be derived therefrom. It is proposed to show that a change in our system of rural school administration is essential to continued progress in education.

In presenting these proposals in the form of a bill, at the approaching session of the Legislature, there is no thought of attempting to force hastily upon the public a system that does not commend itself to the judgment of the majority. These proposals do, however, represent mature conclusions arrived at after long and earnest study of the problem, and confirmed by like conclusions of authorities on school administration everywhere. They are put forward in a sincere effort to improve rural education, and it is confidently expected that they will receive sympathetic consideration, and that when they have been thoughtfully weighed they will commend themselves to the judgment of the people.

I. THE PROBLEM

The problem of rural education in Alberta presents three main phases:

- (1) To ensure the full-time operation of sufficient schools, both elementary and secondary.
- (2) To effect a fair distribution of the cost.
- (3) To improve the quality of the education provided in the schools.

In none of its phases are we meeting the problem as well as we might.

(1) FULL-TIME OPERATION OF SUFFICIENT SCHOOLS.

Elementary

Though there has been a marked improvement in respect to operation since the establishment of the equalization grants—the number of schools operating for eight months or more having increased from seventy per cent to ninety per cent of the whole—there are still too many schools which, on account of lack of money, or failure to open at the proper time, or the leaving of the teacher during the term, fail to provide the children with full-time training. Over three hundred schools operated for less than one hundred and sixty days in 1927.

Secondary

In the field of secondary education there is a deplorable lack. Although one or more secondary grades are available in eight hundred rural school districts, and the elementary school teachers are doing their best, it must be admitted that it is only where the lower grades are light, and the teacher especially well qualified, that high school work can be properly done, without rather serious interference with the work of the elementary grades, for which the one-room school primarily exists. The rural high school, which is a consolidation of several neighboring districts for high school purposes only, meets the need fairly well in the localities where such consolidations have been formed. But, being a voluntary association, it is difficult to effect, and although the legislation was passed eight years ago, there are, at the present time, but ten such schools in existence. Many town and village schools are overcrowded, owing, to a considerable extent, to the presence of high school pupils from the rural districts. The \$30 fee, which is payable by such districts, falls far short, in most cases, of reimbursing the town schools for the cost of the service rendered, but as long as it is payable by districts whose financial resources do not enable them to run their elementary school for ten months, the fee cannot well be raised.

Moreover, though the Alberta curriculum for secondary schools authorizes commercial, technical, agricultural, and general courses, as well as normal entrance and university matriculation courses, very few schools are able to offer anything in addition to the two more academic courses. There is great need for secondary schools that will provide a type of training more suited to the needs of many young people whose path leads neither to normal school nor university.

Everywhere there is an insistent demand for secondary education. The number of pupils passing the Grade VIII or High School Entrance examinations in 1928 was over two and one-half times the number passing in 1920. The high school enrolment has increased over fifty per cent during that period, and now exceeds ten per cent of the total enrolment. These figures show plainly enough the anxiety of the people of Alberta that the education of their children should not be limited to the elementary grades. For lack of adequate educational opportunity, many of the best people leave the farm, not a few of them being lost to the province entirely.

The importance of secondary education is well set forth in the Report of the Manitoba Educational Commission, published in 1924:

"A higher educational standard is being required for admission to the professions, to business and to the skilled trades. A complete secondary school course of four years is now required for entrance to the older professions. For the newer professions, such as Pharmacy, Accounting and Veterinary Medicine, a three years' secondary school course is now required where an elementary education was sufficient a few years ago. Stenographers, clerks, and salesmen without at least partial secondary school training find difficulty in obtaining employment and in succeeding after they have found employment. The more attractive positions in the industries and in commerce are even more exacting.

"Farming today calls for an intelligence and training as great as that required for the skilled trades. New methods of cultivation, greater discrimination in selection and care of stock as well as of seed, the application of co-operation to the problems of handling and marketing farm products call for greater ability, greater training and greater knowledge than were required a generation ago. The success of the co-operative movement depends in very large measure upon the intelligence, the trained ability and the capacity of the farmers to meet new conditions, to grapple with large undertakings and to meet the experienced men of business on an equal footing. The new era of agriculture to be ushered in through co-operation, will require of the farmers a training and an intelligence comparable to the best required in other callings and professions. The statistician has shown how the earning capacity of the individual has steadily advanced as his education has been extended. Similarly may it be shown that large undertakings such as the co-operative movement are equally dependent upon the ability and education of those who direct and support them.

"Social and economic conditions are making a secondary school course as necessary today for our children as was an elementary school training for our fathers. A girl today cannot enter the teaching profession, nor expect much success in nursing or in any clerical or commercial or even industrial calling, without at least two or three years' training in the secondary school. In domestic service only are there plenty of openings for the partially educated girls. For the boys partially trained, the ranks of unskilled labor only are open. Boys and girls of ability and character will in the future as in the past overcome the handicap of an insufficient education and attain a greater success than

some of their more favored competitors. Their success, however, will be won not because of their lack of education but in spite of it."

It is everywhere recognized that the average rural school district is quite unable to meet this demand for secondary education. It has neither pupils nor money enough. The demand can be met only by some scheme of co-operation.

(2) THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE COST.

Examining the second phase of our problem, the distribution of the cost, we are confronted with this startling condition: rural school districts vary in assessed valuation from less than \$5,000 to nearly \$400,000, and the rate of taxation falls as low as three mills in some districts and goes as high as eighty mills in at least one. The principle of the tax-supported school has been almost universally accepted. It is held to be right that all the wealth of the province should be taxed for the support of the education of the children of the province, but there can be no justification for so applying the principle that while one man is taxed at the rate of three mills, another is compelled to pay eighty.

Very pertinent to this question of the distribution of the cost of education are the words of Dr. Walter Murray, President of the University of Saskatchewan, spoken in Winnipeg in November of 1927, before the Canadian Education Association:

"When our educational machinery was framed the responsibility for the education of the child rested upon the parent. Today we hold that the state is primarily responsible for the education of the young.

"Before free schools were instituted the state was a benevolent spectator. It offered advice, sometimes gave a little aid, provided permissive or enabling legislation, was interested in a friendly sort of way.

"But when the state declared that every child should have an opportunity for an education, its interest and attitude were changed. It proceeded to give effect to this declaration by controlling the training and certification of teachers, the inspection of schools, the prescription of courses and text-books. Above all it ordered the local school districts to open schools. . . . But the state did not assume responsibility for keeping the school open. It imposed that burden upon the local district and gave it power to make a levy for that purpose. . . .

"I claim that our educational system is inherently unjust. It imposes a national obligation upon units—unequal in resources—units never intended for this purpose. The small rural school district was adopted for another purpose, performed a service for other conditions, but has now become not only inefficient in administration but an instrument of injustice for the discharge of a national obligation."

Equally glaring is the anomaly that, aiming to provide equal educational opportunity for all children, as far as possible, taxable wealth to the amount of nearly \$400,000 is allocated to support the

education of one group while the education of a similar group must rest on the meagre basis of the taxes from \$5,000 supplemented by such grants as the province supplies.

(3) IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF THE EDUCATION.

Coming now to the very vital question of the quality of the education provided in the schools, and how it may be improved, we find four very great defects in our present school system as it applies to the rural area.

(1) We are unable to hold the more ambitious and able teachers. The important work of training our children is so unattractive as a permanent occupation that seven hundred teachers annually leave the profession, and seven hundred young recruits must be found to fill their places. Rural teaching is particularly unattractive. There are a number of reasons for this. The pay is small, often slow, and sometimes uncertain. Rural teaching offers no prospect of promotion. The common salary of \$1,000 which the beginner receives sets the standard for the whole field, so that excellent teachers, who have done faithful work and acquired the experience of many years, receive little more than when they began. Because of this we lose, every year, from the rural schools, hundreds of capable teachers who either go to more attractive positions in town schools, or quit teaching entirely for more remunerative occupations. Many children receive their entire training from inexperienced youths and maidens who move before them in constant procession.

The teacher is the keystone of the arch. The legislative foundation may be well and truly laid, the school buildings and equipment, courses of study and text-books, which are the stones of the superstructure, may be selected and built in with the utmost care, but the strength of the whole to carry the load required to be borne will depend on the ability, equipment, strength of character, and moral earnestness of the men and women who form the keystone of the arch.

A considerable annual loss of teachers is to be expected under any system, but we should be able to hold many of the capable teachers whom we are losing year by year. We shall not have done what can be done to improve the rural schools until by the establishing of a salary schedule it will become possible to pay teachers progressively, on the basis of scholarship, experience, and efficiency. No one, anywhere, has ever discovered a satisfactory way of doing this in a system where there are three thousand independent authorities each employing one teacher.

(2) We are unable to bring intelligence to bear on the important task of placing teachers in the schools for which they are best fitted. The intelligence of the trustees is not questioned, but however intelligent the local board may be, it is impossible to intelligently select a teacher, with nothing on which to base judgment but a sheaf of written applications, and this is all the information the average board has upon which to base its decision. The unfortunate results are well known to all who have observed the tragedy of a very good teacher, who might do excellent work in one type of school, given a task for which she is entirely unfitted.

(3) There is a lack of supervision. Young teachers need guidance. Some teachers are unable to apply the scientific principles of

teaching which they have studied during their normal course to the particular problems they meet in their schools. Some have difficulty in securing and holding attention and interest. Others have difficulty with discipline, or organization or management. There are young teachers who do not understand what is expected of them, nor what they should expect of their pupils. They do not have an adequate comprehension of prevailing standards of good work. Still others have difficulty in interpreting and applying the course of study, in grading their pupils, and in arriving at satisfactory bases for promotions. The inspector gives what help he can, but in a system under which each teacher is employed by a separate board, the chief business of the inspector is to find out the condition of the school, to estimate the value of the work of the teacher, and to report his findings to the school board. Inexperienced teachers and the less efficient need more than inspection,—they need helpful supervision.

The rural schools of Alberta would be vastly improved, if our system of inspection and report were replaced by a system of close supervision by officials whose chief business would be to increase the efficiency of the school rather than to estimate it and report. The full benefit of supervision can be secured only by the co-operation of many districts in large units of administration. The unrelated or conflicting activities of the multitude of separate boards, in employing teachers, should be co-ordinated under joint boards, having a wider jurisdiction and employing a large number of teachers, and thus able to put into effect the recommendations of its supervisors, with respect to placing, replacing, interchanging, and promoting teachers.

(4) There is no satisfactory means of eliminating the inefficient. Teachers whose work has not been satisfactory in one school simply move on to another, and though the first school may be more fortunate in its next venture, the rural schools as a whole are in exactly the same position as before. Under the wider unit of administration and proper supervision, teachers who have not been very successful in a difficult school could be given a chance in an easier one, and, through frequent visits of the supervisor, given all the guidance and help possible. Those who are still unable to render effective service would be released, and having proved unsuccessful in one large unit would have difficulty in engaging with another. There would thus be an elimination of the ineffective. Our present system unfortunately eliminates the best.

Nearly all of these weaknesses, both in respect to providing for the operation of elementary and secondary schools and to distribution of the burden, but more especially in respect to the improving of the quality of the education, are inherent in the very nature of the system of administration now in effect, and cannot be remedied without changing it.

“Whence came our school system? [to quote again from Dr. Murray.] Our school system with the small district as the unit is the creation of the Loyalists. . . . No matter what the Loyalists may have thought of the political views of their cousins in the Republic they certainly did not wish to emancipate themselves from the educational traditions of New England. . . . In Massachusetts the beginning was made with the town or township as the unit. Very shortly the township was divided into

local districts. . . . Why was the division necessary? For this simple reason that the parent was responsible for the education of the child and the parents living near together found it advantageous to combine for the purpose of securing a teacher. . . . The parents combined to secure the teacher and that teacher in the early days lived among the parents in turn. In time the parents asked for permission to make levies to supplement the fees, and later permissive legislation was granted for free schools. Thus you see how naturally the system grew up. The parents were responsible for the education of their children. Parents co-operated. Voluntary co-operation was followed by permissive legislation, this in turn by the compulsory levy for free schools. The size of the unit of administration was determined by the walking power of the child—and there you have the cause behind this small school district. . . .

“Conditions have changed. The state today is responsible, not the parent. The state will not allow the parent to decide what his child shall be taught. The state will not allow him to keep the child at home. The state will not let him decide how much he will pay for education. . . .

“Our system was devised to meet a certain set of conditions. These conditions have changed, but the system remains unchanged.”

Our system of small local districts was brought from eastern Canada into the North-West Territories long ago. Eastern Canada got it from New England, where it developed in a time when every little community was of necessity self-contained and lived largely unto itself, before the advent of the railway, steam and electric power, the automobile, the telegraph and the telephone, or the radio. These things have revolutionized production, transportation, communication, and commerce. They have fostered the development of a new and broader social consciousness, and enabled large numbers to associate in united undertakings for common ends, which before were quite impossible of achievement. Yet in the field of rural school administration we are still fumbling about with a system that was a contemporary of the stage coach, the sickle and the travelling shoemaker. Antiquity is no reproach. The present system is not arraigned because it is old, but because it is outgrown. It hampers development like a tight-fitting garment on a fast-growing boy. The life of the people unfolds; it develops, and new forms, new systems must be evolved to meet the new needs.

Our inherited system, though useful in its day, does not provide for co-operation on the large scale that is necessary to meet the larger educational needs of a new day.

II. THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

(1) SCHOOL DISTRICTS.

The school district, as at present constituted, will continue to be the basic unit of organization. Its present property, assets, and liabilities will in no way be affected. The local board will retain all its present powers and duties, except with respect to engaging and paying the teacher. Local funds will therefore be needed. The local board will make up its annual budget and requisition the amount from the municipality, or in case the district lies in an improvement district, from the Department of Municipal Affairs. The municipality or the Department will make the necessary levy and pay the money to the local board, as is now done in collecting municipalities.

(2) DIVISIONS.

Larger units of administration will be established, by grouping the 3,000 rural school districts of the province in twenty divisions of approximately 150 districts each.

In each division there will be a board of five directors elected by the ratepayers. These divisional boards will have the engaging, placing, and dismissing of all teachers in their respective divisions. The directors will be paid a per diem allowance and mileage.

Each division will have a superintendent, who, with two assistants or supervisors, will constantly supervise the work in the schools.

The superintendent will advise the divisional board with respect to all appointments and dismissals. The authority, however, will be vested in the elected boards.

The superintendent will direct the work of supervision, and will be jointly responsible to the Minister and the divisional board for the efficiency of the schools and the general progress of education within the division. He will be the representative of the Department of Education, replacing the inspector, and will be appointed by the Minister, after consultation with the divisional board, and paid by the Government. The supervisors will be appointed in the same way and paid out of Government grants.

(3) ONE GENERAL TAXING AREA.

For raising the money for teachers' salaries, the twenty divisions will unite, forming one taxing area embracing all the rural districts of the province. There will be a general board, composed of the twenty chairmen of the twenty divisional boards. This general board will fix the rate of pay for all rural school teachers, draw up its annual budget, fix a common mill rate for the entire area, and requisition the money from the municipal authorities. Each division will send in its monthly time sheet and the pay cheques of all rural teachers will be issued from the general office.

The levy will be made on the equalized assessment for supplementary revenue purposes, and the machinery now in use will be employed for collection. Every ratepayer will receive but one tax notice. It will show all his taxes, whether provincial, municipal or school. Each tax notice will show two school rates; the local rate, varying in accordance with local needs as determined by the local boards; and the general rate, uniform throughout the entire area comprising the rural school districts of the province. The proceeds from the local levy will be paid by the municipality to the local board.

The general levy will be used by the general board for the payment of the salaries of all rural teachers, both elementary and high school. School grants, including equalization grants, will still be paid by the province, going into the general fund for the payment of salaries. Grants to some of the weakest districts are as high as \$628 per annum.

For the payment of teachers' salaries, at the present rate, and meeting all the expenses of the general board and of the divisional boards, it is estimated that there would be required a sum equal to a levy of seven and one-half mills on the total assessed valuation of the general taxing area.

Elections.

(1) Local boards will be elected in the same manner as at present.

(2) Divisional boards—Some time in the fall there will be a convention of the division, to which each local board will be entitled to send one accredited delegate. All matters having to do with education throughout the division will be proper subjects of discussion at these annual conventions. At a fixed hour the delegates from each of the five wards into which the division will be divided for election purposes will be segregated and will nominate candidates for the board of directors of the division. The names of the persons so nominated for each ward will be voted upon by the electors of all the districts composing the ward, at the annual school meetings of the local districts. The ballots will be sent to the secretary of the division, counted, and the result announced.

(3) The general board will be composed of the chairmen of the twenty divisional boards.

The rural school administrative system will then consist of:

(1) School districts as at present constituted.

(2) Divisions—twenty in number, each embracing approximately one hundred and fifty districts.

(3) A general taxing area—embracing the twenty divisions.

The corresponding administrative authorities will be:

(1) The existing local boards.

(2) Divisional boards of five directors.

(3) A general board composed of the twenty chairmen of the divisional boards.

The powers and duties of the several authorities will be as follows:

(1) The local boards, except with respect to the employing and paying of the teacher, will retain the powers and duties they now possess, including the control of religious instruction and the teaching of languages other than English.

(2) The divisional boards will be responsible for the engaging and placing of teachers throughout their respective divisions. To assist them in this they will have at their command the professional knowledge of schools and teachers possessed by the superintendents and supervisors. Other functions, not now being performed, will in time be taken on by the divisional boards.

(3) The general board will establish a salary schedule applicable to all rural teachers. It will fix the initial salary to be paid to the holders of the various classes of certificate, the conditions on which

increases will be given, based on experience and efficiency, and set the maximum. It will annually draw up its budget, strike the mill rate required and requisition the amounts from the various municipalities. It will appoint a competent secretary-treasurer, and send out from its office the monthly pay cheques of all rural teachers.

Each of these administrative units is needed, because each has something to do which cannot be so well done by either of the other two, if done at all.

(1) The local board is needed to discharge numerous duties, and exercise important powers now vested in it by The School Act. The responsibility of determining what religious instruction, if any, shall be given in the school must, under our constitution, continue to rest with it. Many local districts have provided themselves with fine schoolhouses, teacherages and other school property, in which a very wholesome local pride is taken. The providing of school buildings and their upkeep is a proper local responsibility, and can be best met locally. The local board is also needed as an authority to whom the superintendent can look for an expression of local opinion concerning the work of the school, and by whom any changes considered to be in the interests of education in the community may be urged.

(2) The division is necessary because, with three thousand rural school boards, each employing one teacher, it is impossible to make rural teaching sufficiently attractive to hold the best teachers, or to make full use of professional knowledge in the placing of teachers, or to make the most effective use of supervision. Any central authority would, on the other hand, be too far removed from the local community and the teacher. Therefore, an intermediate authority is needed, such as the divisional board.

(3) The general board, with a general taxing area, is needed to give the greatest degree of stability to the financing of rural teaching, and to bring our practice, as far as may be, into line with the well-founded principles,—that there should be equal educational opportunity for all children; that the responsibility for education is no longer primarily local, but province-wide; and that the cost involved in the discharge of this general responsibility should be fairly distributed.

In a city school system these principles are recognized, and the advantages above outlined can all be secured. A single board has control of all the property; through its superintendent it directs hundreds of teachers; and the cost is spread evenly over all the taxable property. It is not considered necessary that the parents of the children attending each particular room should elect a separate board to choose the teacher, nor is the city cut up into blocks, each with a different mill rate, supporting one room. In a city such a system would of course be absurd. One board, with one unit of administration, suffices for local affairs, for selecting and promoting teachers, and for spreading the cost over the entire area.

In the country no one board can properly perform all of these functions, because of distance. Neither can they be successfully performed independently, by a multitude of boards. By the addition of intermediate authorities and a general authority, with a suitable division of functions, these proposals aim to overcome some of the most serious handicaps of rural education.

III. RESULTS EXPECTED

From the establishing of the proposed system the following results may be confidently expected:

(1) The full-time operation of all elementary schools, where the conditions warrant.

(2) Better provision for secondary education. Naturally the problem of high school instruction will vary in different divisions, and must be met by the employment of various schemes, depending upon the conditions which prevail. Pupils who can most conveniently attend town and village schools will continue to do so, by arrangement with the town boards, and for every pupil so authorized to attend from the rural area there will be paid from the general school fund a reasonable fee, based on the cost of the service rendered. In some places it will be possible to establish two-room schools, providing for the advanced instruction in the senior room. In others it will be possible to establish rural high school centres, in some of which there might be given a type of training different from that now required for normal school entrance or university matriculation, and better adapted to the needs of many young people. The boarding school is also a possibility.

(3) A fairer distribution of the cost of education.

(4) An improvement in the quality of the education given, to be effected by:

(a) Making rural teaching sufficiently attractive, financially and otherwise, to retain in the rural schools many of the experienced teachers who are now being lost.

(b) Making use of the professional knowledge of the superintendent in the selection and placing of teachers, thus reducing to a minimum the number of misfits.

(c) Thorough supervision. Experience elsewhere has proved conclusively that the average efficiency of rural schools can be very greatly increased by proper supervision.

(d) Greater stability—less frequent change of teachers. When a teacher leaves a school, the valuable understanding she has gained of the ability, temperament, knowledge, aptitudes, and limitations of the various pupils is scrapped, and this knowledge can be acquired by the new teacher only after considerable loss of time.

(e) The elimination of the inefficient.

(5) Greater harmony in rural communities, through the removal of one of the most fruitful sources of neighborhood quarrels—the choosing or the retention of the teacher.

(6) The removal of the greater part of the trouble over the boundaries of school districts.

(7) A simplification of tax-collecting machinery in municipal units where there is duplication at the present time. All taxes will be collected in the same way that the supplementary revenue tax is now collected.

These proposals are the result of careful study of remedies which have been applied in other places, and of the particular conditions prevailing in Alberta. Expert advice has been sought and conferences have been held with many people. If there are better ways of overcoming the obstacles that block the progress of rural education, we are eager to find them, but the system outlined is presented in the firm belief that it will remove the most serious of the barriers, and that it will, by providing a way for rational co-operation with other districts, greatly increase the ability of every district to make effective provision for the education of its children.

PERREN BAKER,

Minister of Education.

Edmonton, Alberta, January 8, 1929.

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